

JUNE 25, 1981

Part of our family have owned this ranch I'm visiting from sovereignty. Exact directions are hard to give, but roughly it's some 100 miles in a southwesterly direction from San Angelo on the east bank of the Pecos river. Wet Mexicans probably make a guess of 80 hard earned miles from their border crossings. On a road map, Iraan is a good tie-in point. In case you are that interested, to be safe, you'd better just wait until a native will agree to be your guide, as the world is mighty spread out in this part of the world.

Different from most of the Shortgrass Country, the terrain is rim rocks and deep gulleys that wash into the river. It's a desolate valley, enclosed in canyons of a harsh beauty that defies the encroachment of man.

Proof of its resistance to man goes back possibly before the Indian times. Caves spilling burned rock down the hillsides are rich in archeological history.

For certain, the Jumanos and the Mescalero Apaches ranged and wintered in the valley. Spanish expeditions passed through on their way to the east. But whoever the inhabitants were, their smoke or their arrows or their muskets made little marks on the land. Also, they'd better have decided before they left the staked plains or sunny Spain that their hide was too tough for kinder climates, because the Pecos is no place for a tenderfoot of any breed.

Further evidence of the quality of the environment was tested in the late 1920s when an oil boom failed to change the land. Fossil fuel miners descended upon the country, blowing up tons of dynamite and throwing out trainloads of pipe and cable without marring the scene.

A short distance to the north of here, the Yates Field flowed oil in proportions that exceeded the wildest dreams of the Texas wildcatters. True, huge acreages were poisoned by salt brine and defaced by black smudge; nevertheless to this day, pump jacks and silver batteries seem to be parked by a temporary license.

Like the oilmen, old cows don't have a strong hold on the valley. Sheep thrive on the sparse grasses, but my cousin that runs the outfit has to be mighty cautious in controlling his appetite for hollow horns. Cattle, as you probably know, require more turf and smoother ground. Often I've wished that the rest of us were blessed by such an irrevocable natural barrier. The best of bankers and the most efficient of feed mills can't change this ranch.

Something new that has been added since my last visit is a religious colony that my cousin claims is waiting for the world to end. At what's bound to be a terrible expense, they've transported in a bunch of boxcars to bury in the mountainsides. Big loads of wood are visible for emergency fuel. I haven't gone over to talk to them. I figure I've heard all the doomsday stories there are by associating with the cattle buyers around the auction houses. It wouldn't be surprising to find out that the whole group was made up of former members of the Texas Cattle Feeders Assn. As tough as fat cattle were during the winter and spring, a lot of these boys on the plains would have made prime prospects for an underground boxcar, especially one that was linked to an underground train that would have taken them away from their misery.

Cool east winds are blowing in the windows of my cousin's ranch house. Gray and purple clouds are floating away from last night's showers. Through the window's the

morning sun is cutting magical patterns of the long steep hillsides. Space and land reign as they have for centuries. What a glorious spot for a bunch of pessimists to figure their last exit. I wonder if they won't change their mind before they break much of this hard ground.